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ABSTRACT

Four ideas characterize postmodernity: skepticism toward grand narratives, critique of the assumption of a unified human subject, problematization of the notion of representation, and a celebration of otherness and difference. Drawbacks to applying postmodern theories to education include: postmodernism is ill-equipped to deal with morally and politically charged, normative educational issues; its focus on the local and the particular is often too narrow; too strong an emphasis on antirepresentationalism results in the inability to make normative decisions; and exaltation of differences leaves little room for effective communal action and dialogue. In light of these weaknesses, philosophical pragmatism is useful and appealing. Like postmodernists, pragmatists are skeptical of grand theories and static knowledge claims, eschew quests for certainty, view all theories as partial and hypothetical, understand knowledge to be socially constructed, and downplay representationalism. Pragmatists, unlike postmodernists, retain a moral vision, a belief in the ethical significance of both the present and what is to come, and faith in humans' ability to bring about a more desirable future. What distinguishes postmodernism and pragmatism are notions of community, dialogue, and democracy which allow individuals to best live in a world characterized by uncertainty, change, and instability. (Contains 30 references.) (JDD)

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Pragmatism, Postmodernism and Education

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Over the last two decades, postmodern theories have increasingly impacted educational discourse and study. As a way of understanding the world, postmodernism has challenged a number of assumptions which undergird the "modern" view of the world, particularly the modernist notion of attempting to ground knowledge in stable, universal, abstract, and timeless truths. Postmodernists argue, however, that there are no such truths. The world, they suggest, is characterized instead by instability, contingency, multiplicity, and uncertainty and, as such, all theories which attempt to conceptualize it are partial, limited, and hypothetical. The impact postmodernism has had on educational discourse is significant. Postmodern theories have helped to reveal the hegemonic nature of education and teaching, to further the belief that knowledge is not abstract and objective but is characterized by interpretation, mediation and social construction, to draw attention to the dynamics of power operative in school and society, and to open space for the voices and understandings of exploited and marginalized peoples. Despite its impact, however, postmodernism poses significant challenges and concerns for education. Primarily, because postmodernism is marked by descriptive theories of the way the world is and not a critical theory of how to act in the world, it does not offer useful, normative directions for education. It is in view of this concern that the philosophy of pragmatism is particularly useful for educational discourse. Pragmatism and postmodernism share many of the same fundamental assumptions, yet, pragmatists retain a moral dimension, an ethical hope for the future, and a faith in the ability of humans to transform the world. This moral dimension, in concert with pragmatist notions of democracy, community, and the possibility of progress, which underlie and give focus and direction to human action in the world, make looking to pragmatism rather than postmodernism more useful in grounding educational discourse and practice.

To begin to characterize postmodernism, it is useful to start with a description of modernism. Like postmodernism, the various characterizations and usages of modernism make it a difficult notion to fairly and briefly capture. However, there are a number of

broad trends and ideas which are consistently labeled modern, particularly faith in the powers of reason, science, technology and in the ultimate progress of civilization. Historically, modernism is tied to the age of enlightenment, an age described by Palmer and Colton as "confident in the powers of human reason and of science...firmly convinced of the regularity and harmony of nature, and...deeply imbued with the sense of civilization's advance and progress" (p. 303). The beginnings of the enlightenment age, arguably dated around the advent of the 17th century, can be characterized by a quest for certainty. While there are numerous arguments suggesting why there was a felt need for certainty at this time (Toulmin offers that it was a "timely response to...the political, social, and theological chaos embodied in the Thirty Years' War {p.70}"), this quest for certainty, and consequently, the felt progress which resulted as seeming philosophic and scientific certainties were ascertained, can be seen as the distinguishing feature of the modern era, an era stretching from the 17th to the 20th century.

Three emblematic figures in this modern quest for certainty were Descartes, Galileo, and Locke. As one of the first modern philosophers, Descartes' project was to build a foundation for truth which rested upon reasoned certainties. In the Discourse on Method he submitted to accept "nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it" (p.16). For Galileo, the aim of science was to uncover the fixed physical laws of nature, like gravity, which would then allow for greater predictability and certainty in the physical world. In the arena of political life, Locke set out to describe the natural state of humans, and to delineate the rights that humans have by virtue of being part of humankind, namely, life, liberty and property. The epistemological, physical, and natural laws sought by these three enlightenment figures are characteristic of the broader modern quest for certainties and sure foundations upon which to ground knowledge.

Linked to the quest for certainty is the modern exaltation of rationality. To be rational, in the modernist vein, is to be able to free the mind of prejudices, biases, and

superstitions and to see the world as it truly is, independently of the distortions of human perception. A fundamental modernist assumption is that there is an ordered world that can be known, and that by "purifying" operations of human reason, through decontextualizing them, one can come to know the truth. Among dreams of the rational project at various times were a method for pursuing knowledge that would engender the same conclusions for all who followed it, a unified science and comprehensive view of the world, and an exact language in which people of different backgrounds could reason together without the barrier of linguistic ambiguities (Toulmin, 104). Underlying these dreams were three parallel pursuits, namely, for universal principles, abstract general axioms, and timeless ideas (Toulmin, 31-35).

The pursuit of the universal, the general and the timeless is quintessentially modern. Rather than focusing on difference, or on anomalies and particularities, the modernist goal was to find universals - universal laws of human nature, of the physical world and of political life. Similarly, the focus was on comprehensive ideas and abstract generalizations (for example, of how humans behave) rather than varieties and concrete diversities. Finally, underlying the goals of universality and generality was the quest for timeless ideas, those ideas which would hold good for all places and at all times. In contrasting the modern with the postmodern, the modern notion of universal, general and timeless ideas is a useful springboard to characterizing the postmodern since the focus in postmodernity is, to a degree, reversed, that is, to the particular, the local and the timely. Rosenthal usefully captures this comparison, as he suggests that one "can see modernism as the attempt to find order within the fragmented, chaotic, ruptured character of the modern experience: Postmodernism, in contrast, responds to, represents, or tries to embrace that part of the modern experience that modernism tries to suppress - the decentered, the contingent, the unstable, the fragmentary" (p. 89).

Essentially postmodernism grows out of, and responds to, the universalizing and generalizing trends of modernity. While there is significant debate as to whether

postmodernity represents a sharp break from the modern or simply is another phase of modernity (see Calhoun, Giroux 1988), it is useful to play postmodernity off modernity in order to characterize it. In doing so, it is important, however, to keep in mind that both terms are attempts to capture broad trends and overriding themes. Both are generalizing terms in that they attempt to broadly characterize certain themes and do not attempt to represent essential, impenetrable, temporal historical categories. The broad postmodern themes of focusing on the local, the particular, and the timely, underlie a number of more sweeping postmodern ideas. Though it is nearly impossible to find complete agreement in the literature as to what it means to be in the postmodern condition, four shared ideas seemed to be held in common by most who try to characterize postmodernity: skepticism toward grand narratives, critique of the assumption of a unified human subject, problematization of the notion of representation, and a celebration of otherness and difference.

In the introduction to The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Lyotard suggests that the "appeal to some grand narrative" is a modern idea, while the postmodern can be defined "as an incredulity toward metanarratives" (pp. xxiii-xxiv). A grand narrative or metanarrative is any form of totalizing or encompassing story framed to be superior to all other stories. Rosenthal suggests that metanarratives attempt to "cleave a single ordering around which all of history orbits and can be understood to express" (p. 93). Examples of metanarratives include Marxism, Judeo-Christianity, rationality, and patriarchy. These can be viewed as metanarratives because they each posit some larger picture of how the world can be viewed or offer a telos for the direction in which history is moving. Marxists view all of history as a class struggle and offer that the future holds the inevitable progress of humankind toward communism. The Judeo-Christian metanarrative attempts to paint a picture of a 'Creator' sanctioned just society, and look to the bible as a way to understand history and to find lessons for creating the future that is meant to be. Rationality, a hallmark of modernity, views the history of the western world

as "the conquest of unreason by reason, of superstition by science" (Rosenthal, 93). Finally, patriarchy can be seen as a totalizing metanarrative in that it posits the essential story of humankind and history as one of hegemonic male dominance, a concept which then becomes the anchor around which all other narratives revolve.

Postmodernists find metanarratives particularly objectionable because in offering one correct way of viewing the world and history, they suppress differences and privilege a single perspective which purports "to justify certain practices or institutions by grounding them upon a set of transcendental, ahistorical, or universal principles" (Peters, 99). There are two related problems with metanarratives. First, there is little historical evidence to justify or ground these narratives, as there are too many anomalies and variables to make an all-encompassing, "big picture" thesis workable - the socialist revolution has not come to fruition, a just Christian kingdom on earth has not been created, the seeming rational ordering of the world and the steady progress of science is certainly questionable, and patriarchy is but one problem among many, and not the essential problem around which all others can be viewed. Beyond the lack of historical weight, the larger problem with metanarratives is that in claiming totality of perspective, they are hegemonic. This is because people often unwittingly participate in upholding their validity, thereby denying the authenticity of the concrete particularities of their own experience. Giroux (1988) offers that under the light of postmodernism, "general abstractions that deny the specificity and particularity of everyday life, that generalize out of existence the particular and the local, that smother difference under the banner of universalizing categories are rejected as totalitarian and terroristic" (p. 14).

Tied to the distrust of metanarratives is a rejection of absolutes. Postmodernists insist "that there can be no single rationality, no single morality, and no ruling theoretical framework for the analysis of social and political events" (Burbules & Rice, p. 395). Basically this amounts to suggesting that there is not one 'right' way to view the world and that all theories which claim to be universal and generalizable are rather only limited and

partial. In sum, as there can be no grand narratives by which to view the world, postmodernists question the modernist logic of searching for absolute foundations and for universal, general and timeless certainties on which to ground knowledge.

Paralleling the questioning of grand theories, a second theme of postmodern discourse is a critique of the notion of a unified subject, which postmodernists claim is similarly totalizing and hegemonic. This is because it purports that there is one true, unchanging essence to both humankind and particular individuals. There are two aspects to this critique. First, to proclaim a unified subject is to suggest that individuals are "endowed with a stable 'self' constituted by a set of static characteristics such as sex, class, race, [and] sexual orientation" (Lather, p. 5). Postmodernists argue that the meanings, and thus the stability of individual characteristics, are not given and static, but that the subject has been de-centered, and "refashioned as a site of disarray and conflict inscribed by multiple contestory discourses" (Lather, p. 5). The second aspect of this critique is incredulity toward an essentialist view of humans. Underlying an essentialist view of humankind is the suggestion that there is one unchanging human essence, and consequently, one authentic way to be in the world. This view of humans delegitimizes any whose experience does not fit the given, acceptable mold, a mold which is sustained by those in power. In a discussion of postmodernism and otherness, Giroux concisely captures this critique. He puts forth that postmodernism "criticizes the notion of the unified subject as a Eurocentric construct designed to provide white, male, Christian bosses and workers with a legitimating ideology for colonizing and marginalizing those Others who do not measure up to the standards of an 'I' or 'We' wielding power from the center of the world" (1992, p. 119).

In "Postmodern Blackness" bell hooks shares Giroux's concern with the positing of a essential, unified subject. Describing African-American resistance struggle, she suggests it "must be rooted in a process of decolonization that continually opposes re-inscribing notions of 'authentic' black identity" (p. 28). What she means by this is that in

attempting to fight against oppression and the inscription of a simplistic, one dimensional black identity by the dominant class or by those in power (colonization), it is important that African-Americans do not fall into the same trap as their oppressor, and in so doing, replace the oppressive identity with a similar, though self-defined, one dimensional identity. In light of postmodernism, hooks claims that African-Americans need instead to affirm multiple black identities, and varied black experiences and not reduce them to one, essential, black identity.

A third theme of postmodern discourse is a problematization of the notion of representation. Many modern philosophers hold to the idea that knowledge of the world can be represented in an orderly, systematic and progressive way. Additionally, they believe that knowledge claims can be made in a purely objective fashion, that is, that stated truths reflect an objective, external reality which can be known, conceptualized and characterized. Describing the modern notion of representation, Peters claims "an essentially realist epistemology based on a mirror theory of knowledge and art conceives of representation as the reproduction of an external reality" (p. 99). He then argues that the mirror image of nature is inadequate, as representation is not the simple mirror reproduction of an external reality; rather knowledge is always mediated by the human subject. In support, Lather adds that language is not "a transparent reflection of some reality capturable through conceptual adequation," but that it "is a productive, constitutive force" which mediates and produces reality rather than reflecting it" (p. 25).

The postmodern problematization of representation sheds light on the significant difference between modern and postmodern epistemological orientation. Modernist epistemology, in purporting that knowledge claims mirror an objective external reality, is representational and realist. In contrast, postmodern antirepresentationalism "rejects 'the metaphysics of presence' - the view that reality is directly given, without mediation, to subjects" (Beyer & Liston, p. 379). In denying the view that reality is given without mediation, postmodern epistemology rejects modernist mirror representation and instead

supports a notion of epistemology as performance. At the heart of an epistemology of performance is knowing as making, creating, producing, and acting (Peters, p. 100). Knowledge, postmodernists argue, is not given, but rather is created by subjects acting in and upon the world. Postmodern anti-representationalism is linked to the belief that there is no such thing as literal, given or foundational meaning of experiences; rather all meanings are interpretations. In Doing What Comes Naturally, Fish appeals to literary and legal studies in arguing for antifoundationalism. He claims that neither laws nor literary meanings are grounded in objective truths or foundations but rather their meanings are necessarily rooted in interpretations. The persistence of seemingly universal understandings (of laws, texts, and reality in general) is not because of some foundational properties, rather "meanings that seem perspicuous and literal are rendered so by forceful interpretative acts" (p. 9). Thus, implicit in postmodern anti-representationalism is an uncovering of the articulation of power and of the hegemony of the dominant class, that is, showing that it is only through the exercise of power and force that certain understandings or views become taken as foundational.

A final theme of postmodernism is the celebration of difference and "otherness." This theme grows out of the previous three themes. In disavowing grand narratives, unified subjects, and a mirror representation of reality, postmodernists offer a world that is diverse, decentered, partial, contingent, contested, heterogeneous, pluralistic, unstable, and fragmented. In such a world, no one person or group of people are privy to some authentic view of reality, but, just as individuals are characterized by multiple identities, so too are there multiple ways of viewing, understanding and being in the world. Bauman clearly captures this notion:

> What the inherently polysemous and controversial idea of *postmodernity* most often refers to...is first and foremost an acceptance of the ineradicable plurality of the world - not a temporary state on the road to the not-yet-attained perfection, sooner or later to be left behind, but the constitutive quality of existence. By the same

> token, postmodernity means a resolute emancipation from the characteristically modern urge to overcome difference and promote sameness...In the plural and pluralistic world of postmodernity, every form of life is *permitted on principle*; or, rather, no agreed principles are evident which may render any form of life impermissible (pp. 39-40).

Underlying the postmodern attention to otherness and difference is a desire to dismantle power structures which marginalize, and thus delegitimize the voices of those who, without power, have traditionally been oppressed and exploited, including women, citizens of the third world, ethnic minorities, people of color, and children. Rosenthal claims "postmodernism argues an agenda of heterogeneity, diversity, fluidity, and difference over and above unity, claiming that a central, unifying point of view is always a subterfuge of power" (p. 95). Thus, since to claim universals or essential, authentic identities is to assert 'power over', differences and particularities are highlighted and celebrated.

The four broad postmodern themes addressed, skepticism toward grand narratives, critique of the assumption of a unified subject, problematization of the notion of representation, and a celebration of difference and otherness, have significant implications for educational study, discourse, and practice. In a positive light, there have been a number of important and valuable educational insights which have grown out of, been reinforced, or been further refined by postmodernism. First, postmodern theories have helped to uncover the degree to which discourse (and thus teaching) can be hegemonic, particularly in the maintenance of dominant societal myths (such as meritocracy) and in the positing of one dimensional, 'objective' views of knowledge (i.e. one correct view of history). Paralleling this idea, postmodernism has opened up spaces for multiple understandings and knowledges, and it has furthered the notion that knowledge is socially constructed and not objectively given. This model of knowledge begins with the belief that what are normally taken for granted as facts and commonplace understandings are not objective, neutral, discrete and abstract, rather they are human

interpretations of reality, and thereby, they are limited, partial, and always subject to change. Attending to the social construction of knowledge leads to an additional beneficial consequence of postmodernism, that is, greater attention to the dynamics of power, and the relativizing of traditional forms of pedagogical authority. In this regard, educators have begun to take more seriously the claim that "statements considered true are dependent upon history, cultural context, and relations of power operative in a given society, discipline, institution, etc." (McLaren, p. 182). Further, and perhaps most significantly, postmodernism, in the celebration of difference, has helped to usher in a more pluralistic and inclusive pedagogical and curricular approach, has sensitized educators to concrete, local, particular and contingent concerns and issues, and has opened up spaces for the voices, knowledges, and histories of those who have been traditionally marginalized.

While postmodern theories have led to useful changes in educational thinking and practices, there are nonetheless, significant drawbacks to applying postmodern theories to education. Primarily, despite its often inciteful and challenging tone, as if presenting a call for action, postmodernism as it has been articulated is predominated by descriptive theories of the way things are in a "post" modern world rather than critical theories with clear directions. Yet education, while incorporating elements of description, is inherently and necessarily a normative field. Where postmodernists tend to eschew the normative dimension for fear of positing seeming absolutes and offering, in universal terms, what "ought" to be done, educators must address normative questions because they must act in some way in the classroom and in so doing, they necessarily uphold certain normative moral and political commitments. Beyer and Liston concisely capture this issue,

> As educators we are always and necessarily moral actors, at whatever level we teach, in whatever subject matter we claim competence. We are confronted daily with myriad choices that call for the development of reasons to support one course of action over

> another, the result of which may have profound and long-lasting consequences. A postmodern orientation seems ill-equipped to handle these deliberative features of daily educational life (p. 390).

There are a number of reasons why postmodernism is ill-equipped to deal with morally and politically charged, normative educational issues. Fundamentally, postmodernism does not offer a tangible theory of action and human agency in the world, nor does it give hope that action in the present can bring about a more desirable envisioned future. There are a number of other related concerns in developing educational strategies out of a postmodern view of the world. First, the postmodern focus on the local and the particular is often too narrow, and thus potentially more pedagogically useful global and structural understandings are not sought or legitimized. Second, too strong and emphasis on anti-representationalism results in moral and political relativism and the inability make and justify normative decisions. Finally, exaltation of difference is often at the expense of notions of community and solidarity, thereby limiting effective communal action and meaningful and constructive dialogue across differences.

As described earlier, one of the significant contrasts between modernism and postmodernism is in focus, modernism being on the universal, timeless and general where postmodernism is on the local, timely, and particular. While attention to the local struggles and concerns, timely reactions and responses, and the particularities of issues is important, so too is a sense of a bigger picture in which these become meaningful. In education, the issue of local struggles against oppression and exploitation is emblematic of this concern. In the effort to create more just and equitable social relations, Beyer and Liston suggest that "local efforts frequently require insights attainable only through the examination and critique of non-local sources of exploitation and oppression, and necessitate directions that are ascertainable through cultural and moral visions that may transcend the immediate situation" (p. 375). This points to the potential usefulness of a dialectical relationship between local concerns and more global, structural issues. An

example where this insight is meaningful is in the transformation of underfunded, inadequately staffed and resourced urban schools. While local struggles to generate greater funds for school improvement are important, without broader insights into how and why urban schools are often significantly inferior and inadequate (the broader policy of basing public school funding on local property taxes being one powerful explanation) local struggles rarely lead to the degree of transformation desired.

A second concern for educators, in light of postmodernism, is that emphasis on antirepresentation, while it usefully highlights the socially constructed nature of knowledge, can lead to moral and political relativism. Given that there is no one true or authentic way to view the world, and that language does not mirror some objective, abstract reality, it is unclear how postmodernists would be able to distinguish among values, decide among alternatives or judge some actions to be better than others. Burbules and Rice purport "having deconstructed all metanarratives and radically relativized all possible values," postmodernism provides little moral guidance and thus "leaves no clear way of justifying *any* alternatives" (p. 398). With reference to education, it would thus be unclear how educators could make and justify decisions about which books to use, which pedagogical strategies to pursue, which authors to stress and which to ignore, how to order and sequence learning experiences, and which understandings to emphasize.

A third challenge postmodernism poses for education is in pursuing meaningful and constructive dialogue that transcends particularities and differences. Postmodern exaltation of difference and otherness, in concert with seemingly pervasive moral and political relativism, leaves little room for effective communal action and dialogue which unites rather that divides individuals. Beyer and Liston suggest that "if the valorization of otherness precludes the search for some common good that can engender solidarity even while it recognizes and respects that difference, we will be left with a cacophony of voices that disallow political and social action that is morally compelling" (p. 380).

Further, despite the intent of celebrating diversities and variety, attention to difference can have the opposite effect, leading to an insular celebration of one's own or one's group identity, and a disavowal of the need for interpersonal and intergroup interaction, understanding, or even dialogue. Sharing this concern, Calhoun claims that "difference is often made so absolutely prior to commonalty that no basis for mutual engagement or even respect is provided" (p. 91). Without a foundation for dialogue and mutual engaging activity, solidarity resulting in collective struggle and action among students, individuals and groups is not only unlikely, but potentially impossible.

The challenges that the postmodern narrow attention to the local concerns, relativizing of discourse and action, and exalting of difference pose make embracing the postmodern significantly problematic for educators. This is particularly true because postmodern theories lack normative and critical dimensions that can serve as a ground for a theory of human action and agency. It is in light of this weakness that philosophical pragmatism is particularly useful and appealing. On many counts, pragmatism parallels postmodernism. Like postmodernists, pragmatists are skeptical of grand theories and static knowledge claims, eschew quests for certainty, view all theories as partial, limited, and hypothetical, understand knowledge to be socially constructed, downplay representationalism, and perceive the world to be plastic, uncertain, fragmented, open-ended, pluralistic, and unstable. Yet pragmatists, unlike postmodernists, retain a moral vision, a firm belief in the ethical significance of both the present and what is yet to come, and a faith in the ability of humans to bring about a more desirable future. Further, pragmatists hold to a number of referents, including notions of democracy, community, and the possibility of progress, which undergird and give direction to human action in the world. Thus despite beginning with many of the same themes and premises, this moral, and thereby normative, dimension that pragmatism sustains makes looking to pragmatism rather than postmodernism more valuable for educational discourse. To illustrate this point, it is useful to explore the parallels while also examining how the pragmatist

normative, moral dimension adds to the common base that postmodernism and pragmatism share.

The parallels between postmodernism and pragmatism are significant. Despite some subtle differences, the broad postmodern themes of skepticism toward master narratives, distrust of notions of unified and essential human subjects, problematization of representation, and celebration of difference are also characteristic of pragmatism, particularly as articulated by William James and John Dewey, and more recently, in the neopragmatism of Richard Rorty and the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West. Fundamentally, postmodernists and pragmatists begin with a similar view of the world. Both argue that the world is unstable, changing, contingent, incomplete and open-ended. The words Dewey uses to describe the world are quite comparable to those of many postmodern writers. He offers that "man finds himself living in an aleatory world; his existence involves, to put it baldly, a gamble. The world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable" (1958, p. 41). Elsewhere he describes the natural world as "malleable and plastic," "contingent, uncertain, and incomplete," "moving and altering," characterized by "possibility," and "infinite in space and time, having no limits here or there" (1966, p.70, 1958, p. 117, 1966, p. 54, ibid., 1966, p. 60). Also consistent with postmodern focus, Dewey attends predominantly not to the general, universal and timeless, but rather to the specific, local and timely. In describing the pragmatist view of philosophy, he claims that ultimately it is marked by "the transfer of interest from the eternal and universal to what is changing and specific, [and] concrete" (1966, p. 47).

Like postmodernists, pragmatists distrust master narratives, posited essences, and foundational absolutes and argue that "there is no single totality in which everything can be encompassed" (Bernstein, p. 521). What made the pragmatist philosophy of Peirce, James, and Dewey so distinctive is that they evaded, in Cornel West's words, "epistemology-centered philosophy by refusing to search for foundations and quest for certainty" (1989, p. 44). By embarking rather on a search for practical solutions to timely

problems and seeking a philosophy which allowed them to live most adequately in the time in which they lived, the pragmatist philosophers represented a break for the "modern" philosophy which had characterized most of the preceding 300 years. The pragmatist philosophers, particularly Dewey, sought to "recover" philosophy from attachment to the traditional modern concerns of seeking certainty, truth, essences and foundational principles, and to return philosophy to the arena of more practical issues and to the humanist realm of the particular and the timely. In light of this goal, and in the rejection of "modernist" philosophy, the world view of the pragmatists closely mirrors that of the postmodernists. James and Dewey began with the assumption that the universe was changing and evolving and that a meaningful philosophy would offer a way for people to live most adequately in an ever changing world. Implicit in this assumption was their idea that the conclusions they would reach would not be final, absolute truths, but tentative and provisional tools which could be used to help bring about a more desirable future. In the words of Dewey, "every proposition concerning truths is really in the last analysis hypothetical and provisional," while James suggests that theories are "instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest" (Dewey, 1973, p. 49, James 1975, p. 32). Thus like the postmodernists, pragmatists eschewed grand narratives and rather accepted the provisional and limited nature of all theories.

Yet despite the parallels, pragmatist incredulity toward grand narratives avoids the nihilistic and cynical overtones characteristic of postmodern disavowal of them. This is because undergirding this distrust, pragmatists maintain the possibility of progress and have faith that the limited and partial theories which humans come up with to deal with the present, and to help create an envisioned future, do make a difference in the world. Both Dewey and James argued that philosophy should be about how to live best in the present while using creative intelligence to bring to fruition a desirable future. The means by which to do this, James puts forth, is to "adopt the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, categories, supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things,

fruits, consequences, facts" (p. 32). The value of experience is not then to record truths, principles or essences (a representationalist goal), but to use experience as a basis from which to organize and help project and construct the future. In directing future actions, the pragmatists claim humans first experience situations and problems. From there, they should imagine possible solutions and the consequences of each potential course of action, and then act upon the most beneficent consequences. James offers "the whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one" (p. 30). Underlying this view of philosophy is a faith that despite uncertainties, and the tentative and unstable nature of the world, humans can act effectively in the world, and "ought" to aim to bring about the best possible envisioned consequences. This normative dimension distinguishes pragmatism from postmodernism. While beginning with a somewhat postmodern basis in skepticism toward absolutes, Burbules alludes to the difference confidence in the power of humans makes. He claims,

> Pragmatism takes a skeptical attitude toward enduring claims of knowledge and value; our beliefs, like any other invention, are made by human hands and minds, expressed out of lived situations, and concerned with problems encountered in a social world. As a form of lived practice, our search for means of understanding and action should be directed not toward a "quest for certainty," but toward attaining, if possible, workable solutions and decent human relations. In this we must persevere without falling into either cynicism or utopianism - both offspring of a faith absolutes (p. 477).

Rather than falling into the pessimism and cynicism that often characterizes postmodern notions of agency, pragmatists confidence in the effect of human actions upon the world sustains an important, ethical hope for the future. Dewey captures this in his closing remarks in his essay, "The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy," asserting "faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the

present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and made articulate: surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy" (1981, p. 97).

In addition to the skepticism toward master narratives and absolutes, pragmatism, like postmodernism, problematizes notions of representation and unified, essential human subjects. Yet the pragmatist normative stance is again distinctive, in that it offers a way out of the relativism that nonessentialism and antirepresentationalism create for postmodernism. In terms of human subjects, pragmatists do not posit any essential human essences, but rather view humans as continually changing, developing and growing. Subtly different from postmodernists, however, they do retain some non-absolute sense of a unified human subject, thereby allowing for a sense of continuity and connection between human action in the present and the creation of a desirable future. Paralleling postmodern antirepresentationalism, pragmatists argue that ideas and words do not mirror some objective world which is out there to be known. However, they retain a common sense faith in the use of language, words and ideas as tools which rather than leading humans astray, help them to cope with the world. "The function of intelligence is," Dewey claims, "not of copying the objects of the environment, but rather of taking account of the way in which more effective and more profitable relations with these objects may be established in the future" (1981, p. 54). Rorty's sense of antirepresentationalism, "which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality" (p. 1), complements Dewey's. Despite the inability of words and ideas to mirror reality, knowledge in the present, albeit tentative and hypothetical, can and does effect human action in both the present and in the bringing to fruition an envisioned future.

Finally, pragmatism parallels postmodernism in the celebration of difference and otherness. The pragmatist conception of democracy is premised on the value of differences and the enrichment possibilities that different understandings, viewpoints, and

perspectives bring to society. Yet unlike postmodernists, pragmatists refrain from uncritical valorization of difference, and instead maintain that there must be dialectical relationship between difference and notions of commonalty and community which allow people, as Bernstein asserts, to work "toward a type of society in which we can at once respect and even celebrate differences and plurality but always strive to understand and *seek* a common ground with what is other and different" (p. 521). This dialectical relationship distinguishes postmodern and pragmatist conceptions of difference. For pragmatists, differences are viewed not as divisive obstacles but as valuable resources in adding to the development and the enrichment of the whole. They would agree with Ellsworth that "realizing that there are partial narratives that some social groups or cultures have and others can never know, but that are necessary to human survival, is a condition to embrace and to use as an opportunity to build a kind of social and educational interdependency that recognizes differences as *different strengths* and as *forces for change*" (p. 319).

For pragmatists, faith in democracy grounds constructive and meaningful dialogue despite and across differences, and thus, a democratic society is the ideal society. For Dewey, democracy means more than a stagnant political concept, it is an all inclusive way of life. He offers "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (1944, p. 87). Communication and dialogue are intrinsic to democracy, as democracy "is the idea of community life itself" (1955, p. 148). True community involves conversation, give and take, and the sharing of ideas and experiences. At the heart of Dewey's conception of democracy is faith in the power of every individual to contribute to the enrichment of the whole society. It follows from this that the unique offerings and contributions of each individual, embedded in the communal context, must be attended to, and prized. Dewey asserts:

> ...after all the cause of democracy is the moral cause of the dignity and worth of the individual. Mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences, is ultimately the only method by which human beings can succeed in carrying on this experiment in which we are all engaged, the greatest experiment of humanity - that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others (1940, p. 370).

In this type of society, the interactions people have with each other will be numerous and varied and contribute to the greater whole of the community. It is this sense of community which is absent from postmodern discourse, and unlike postmodernists, pragmatists temper the exaltation of difference with a sense of an ever changing community in which differences become valuable and meaningful.

Ultimately, what distinguishes postmodernism and pragmatism are these notions of community, dialogue, and democracy which pragmatists suggest allow individuals to best live in a world characterized by uncertainty, change and instability. Where postmodern theories predominately describe the world, pragmatist both characterize the world and offer a way of being in the world, and a way of acting to secure an envisioned and desirable future. Yet even given this direction, pragmatists, like postmodernists, maintain the tentativeness and malleability of all theories and ideas. Despite democracy grounding meaningful dialogue amid differences, even democracy is an ever changing and transforming notion as "an American democracy can serve the world only as it demonstrates in the conduct of its own life the efficacy of plural, partial, and experimental methods in securing and maintaining an ever-increasing release of the powers of human nature" (Dewey, 1989, p. 133).

Cornel West suggests that "the key to pragmatism, the distinctive feature that sets it apart from other philosophical traditions - and maybe its unique American character - is its emphasis on the ethical significance of the future" (1993, p. 111). For educators, this emphasis on the future, and on individual's ability to make a difference in bringing about a more desirable future is crucial. Without faith that "human thought and action - can

make a difference in relation to human aims and purposes" (West, 1993, p. 111) and faith that the uncertain, plural, unstable, and contingent nature of the world is not cause for turmoil or despair but for action, educators would lack both the vision and the instrumentalities for bringing about a more just, equitable, and desirable future. Thus despite pragmatism and postmodernism beginning with parallel fundamental assumptions of incredulity toward master narratives, problematization of representation and unified subjects, and celebration of difference, the ethical dimension that pragmatists retain makes looking to pragmatism more valuable for educational discourse. This is because pragmatism moves beyond description and offers a way for individuals to be in the world, and to act with confidence that their actions do make a difference. Without this confidence, what remains is cynicism and despair where "future possibilities seem not only remote but beyond justification and construction, while present social realities appear beyond reconstruction" (Beyer & Liston, p. 388).

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